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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6349
INFO RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 8398
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 7629
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3076
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI PRIORITY 9476
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 001459

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/03/2018

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SUBJECT: CODEL TIERNEY MEETS WITH ZARDARI

Classified By: Charge d' Affaires Peter W. Bodde, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On March 27, CODEL Tierney met with Pakistan People's Party (PPP) co-chair Asif Zardari. Zardari professed his appreciation for U.S. support for the election and stressed that the U.S. should consider the new Parliament the primary decisionmaking entity in the government. He detailed his plans for the provincial governments and described the economic challenges facing the new government. Zardari said he would not allow Kashmir to hinder improvement in the bilateral relationship with India. He said the new government would continue vigorous counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S. but explained that the new government's approach to combating militancy may differ from Musharraf's. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Codel Tierney (Representatives John Tierney, Keith Ellison, Jim Moran, Betty McCollum, Maurice Hinchey, and Barbara Cubin) accompanied by Polcouns met with Zardari at his home on March 27. Also in attendance were Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Information Minister Sherry Rehman, Zardari's top advisor Husein Haqqani, and Zardari's sister, Dr. Azra Fazal, an MNA from Nawabsha.

¶3. (C) After Codel expressed their condolences for Benazir Bhutto's death, Zardari began by emphasizing his appreciation for U.S. support for the restoration of democracy. His vision for Pakistan, Zardari explained, was the same as that of his late wife--he hoped to see Pakistan become a responsible and safe democratic country. The PPP intended to "save Pakistan," Zardari elaborated, by undercutting religious fundamentalism with increased education and political participation at the grassroots level.

Time to Deal with Parliament

¶4. (C) Representative McCollum discussed her eagerness to foster closer relationships between the U.S. and Pakistani legislative branches. Zardari responded by stressing Parliament should be sovereign and given the opportunity to prove it can handle Pakistan's problems. He said USG policy in the past few years has focused on one individual; the new Parliament would not accept being bypassed. Zardari said a closer "democratic" relationship--that transcends military assistance--is possible with the U.S. and asked Codel to "find ways to help Pakistan help themselves."

Provincial Governments

¶15. (C) Zardari said the PPP is in the process of forming a government in Balochistan; he said they could have made a government alone in North-West Frontier Province but included the Awami National Party (ANP) to provide a Pushtun base to combat extremism. Zardari commented he is happy to let the ANP lead in NWFP because their political views are similar to the PPP, as both are primarily interested in peace.

¶16. (C) Representative Tierney asked Zardari about achievable benchmarks for FATA development; Zardari noted progress in the tribal areas would be slow and deliberate. He commented he would like to see the Political Parties Act extended into the tribal areas, but said this would be a slow process.

New Economic Policies

¶17. (C) In a response to Representative Tierney's question on Pakistan's economy, Zardari said that he and his advisors had been burning the midnight oil to devise a new strategic plan for Pakistan. Pakistan faced a colossal debt of over "100 billion" (denomination unclear), increasing power shortages that will only worsen in the summer, and rising food prices due to a wheat shortage. Zardari noted the PPP was devising programs to develop Pakistan's natural resources; the beneficiaries of this development would be people in the regions from which the resources came. Zardari hopes such plans would help people become less susceptible to the ideology and opportunities offered by militant groups like Al-Qaeda.

¶18. (C) Zardari worried the U.S. commitment to aid was

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decreasing and asked USG to consider special incentives that encouraged Americans to buy Pakistani textiles from the tribal areas. In these underdeveloped regions, the proceeds from increased exports, Zardari elaborated, could be retained in that area for further industrial improvements. Zardari warned "poverty is the best friend of terrorism" and stressed there was an ample work force in the tribal areas that could be employed as textile engineers, chemical engineers, and dyeing specialists instead of jihadis and terrorists.

Posture toward India

¶19. (C) Representative Ellison asked about Zardari's plans to interact with India, particularly in regard to Kashmir. Zardari said the issue of Kashmir was important to Pakistan; however, he would not allow it to hamper the bilateral relationship with India. For the last 60 years, Kashmir had been the excuse to keep Pakistan's war machine going, Zardari claimed. He intended to change this, saying "war negates progress." Zardari said he wanted Pakistan's relationship with India to be one of mutual dependence: India could rely on Pakistan as an energy corridor and Pakistan could be carried on the back of India's economic progress. Zardari commented thoughts of his son guided his actions because he was keenly aware Bilawal's generation will have to pay for his governance mistakes.

Committed to CT

¶10. (C) In response to Representative Moran's question about Zardari's counterterrorism strategy, Zardari declared his commitment to counterterrorism would equal Musharraf's. Combating terrorism was "very personal," he explained, because his wife lost her life to a terrorist attack. Zardari said his methodology may differ from Musharraf's: "we are an elected people, and we cannot use the language a dictator used." As an example, Zardari said he thought the terrorists should be attacked on different fronts at the same time.

Zardari and other coalition leaders will be briefed on counterterrorism efforts by Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Ashfaq Kayani; they will begin devising a more specific counterterrorism plan after the briefing. Zardari has met with Kayani and said both are on board with continuing robust counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S. "Everything will be the same, where it was," Zardari declared, "...no, it will be better."

¶11. (C) Zardari continued to express appreciation for counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S., commenting, "that's where we need you." He suggested the UN set up an anti-terrorism fund designed to win hearts and minds by providing assistance to victims. He suggested that if people were injured in the war on terror, the fund could provide them and/or their family with monetary support. Zardari argued this would show Pakistanis that the world cares about their contributions to fighting terrorism.

Mentoring His Children

¶12. (C) Representative McCollum and Representative Cubin both expressed interest in Zardari's children and their plans for the future. Zardari explained that all his children became political the day their mother died. He said they are as committed to the cause as he is, and all have or will hold positions in the PPP. Bilawal is Party Chairman, Zardari's eldest daughter will be Chairman of the Women's Wing, and his youngest daughter will be Chairman of the Youth Wing.

¶13. (U) Codel Tierney did not have an opportunity to clear this cable.

BODDE